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## Stepping Stone Community Education – A Stepping Stone to Third Level Education.

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## ***Stepping Stone***

***Community education – A stepping stone to third level education.***

**Lorraine Perkins**

## **Declaration of Ownership**

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the  
Masters in Child, Family and Community, is entirely my own work and has not been  
submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate: .....

Date: .....

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Carol Robinson, a true friend who inspired many people to reach their full potential.

I would like to say a big thank you to all the participants of this study for their time and honesty. I wish you all the best of luck in your future studies.

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To my friends and family, including my son, Ryan who stuck by me until the end, thanks for your patience.

And finally to my partner, Darren, for giving me the courage, love and support that helped me to complete this Masters.

## **Abstract**

The focus of this research is to explore supports that facilitated participation and retention of learners on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education. This research was in partnership with Irish National Association of Adult Education (AONTAS) and supported by Community Links, Dublin Institute of Technology. (DIT)

This research is qualitative in nature. For this purpose, a focus group of community learners and semi-structured interviews with community education professionals was conducted. The research gives in-depth insight into learners experiences of what supports facilitated participation in community education and additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

The study found that learners who participated in this study are motivated to engage for a variety of reasons ranging from, meeting new people and being a positive role model for their children. Learners identified a range of challenges they overcame to participate and remain on this course and identified supports in community education that they found most supportive to overcome these challenges. These included the teaching style of the tutor, learning in groups and the provision of a safe learning environment. Overall the gains from participating on this community education course related to increased personal confidence and an increase in academic belief. However, findings suggest learners' experience barriers to participation and progression and include economic, social, cultural, situational and dispositional barriers. Additional supports highlighted to overcome these barriers in order to progress to third level education for these learners were confidence boosting, an increase academic knowledge, information supports, financial supports, childcare and flexible third level options.

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## **Abbreviations**

ALCES	Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme
AONTAS	Aos Oideachais Naisiunta Tri Aontu Soarlach, (meaning national adult education through voluntary unification)
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CEN	Community Education Network
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HEA	Higher Education Authority
NALC	National Adult Learning Council
NDP	National Development Plan
NQAF	National Qualifications Authority Framework
SEG	Socio-Economic Group

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Appendix 1: Letter of introduction to the community educator seeking participants

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# **Chapter 1**

## Introduction

# **1. Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The focus of this research is to explore supports that facilitate participation and retention of learners on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education. This research is in partnership with the Irish National Association of Adult Education (AONTAS) and supported by Community Links, Dublin Institute of Technology. (DIT)

This chapter begins with the context of the research and the rationale. It outlines the aims and objectives of the research and methodology used. It proceeds by defining key terms and concludes with the outline of the study.

## **1.2 Context of the Study**

There are convincing reasons why adults should be enabled to participate in further and higher education. Creating opportunities for adults to return to education not only contributes to the economy it also improves the quality of life for individuals, communities and contributes to the wellbeing of society.

The current National Plan for Equity of Access to Third Level Education (2008–2013) identifies enhancing access through lifelong learning and investing in widening participation in third level education as high level goals (National Plan for Equity and Access to Higher Education, 2008). Within this plan there is an objective to increase non-standard entry routes to third level education to 30% of all entrants and states “links between third level education institutions and community education groups will also contribute to the achievement of this target” (National Plan for Equity and Access to Higher Education, 2008, p.62).

Community Education is holistic in its attention to its learners, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of assisting learners to overcome barriers to learning. It affords learners

safe, welcoming environments that offer encouragement and praise, a place where confidence and self esteem is fostered and developed (AONTAS, 2011, p.4).

The provision of community education comes in a variety of forms; it may be accredited or non-accredited, informal or formal. This research focuses on learners of a non-accredited community education maths and English course. The study seeks to primarily discover what supports learners on this community education course need to progress to third level education. Research in this area will contribute to raising awareness of community education as a viable route to third level education and has potential to increase participation of those who are traditionally under-represented in third level education.

### **1.3 Rationale of the study**

The researcher progressed from community education to third level education as a mature student coming from a lower socio-economic background. This process involved overcoming numerous barriers at various stages of the process. The successful journey was facilitated by a range of supports accessed through community education, local resources and colleges attended.

The outcomes of this research will benefit all parties involved. For the researcher it creates an opportunity to develop professional and academic knowledge of the area of community education and provides an opportunity to network with professional organisations.

The outcomes will feed into AONTAS<sup>1</sup> and the Community Education Network (CEN).<sup>2</sup> It will highlight supports that facilitate participation and retention for learners on a community education course who participated in this research. It will identify additional supports needed for these individuals to progress to third level education.

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<sup>1</sup> AONTAS is the National Adult Learning Organisation, a voluntary membership organisation. It exists to promote the development of a learning society through the provision of a quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education which is accessible to and inclusive to all.

<sup>2</sup> The Community Education Network (CEN) comprises of over 130 community education organisations which work collectively to gain recognition for community education, raise its profile and lobby to ensure community education is adequately resourced.

For the community education provider, it identifies what supports facilitate the participation and retention of learners on this course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

In the long term, the study has potential to encourage more community education learners to progress to third level education, thus widening participation in third level colleges.

## **1.4 Aims and Objectives of the Research**

The main aims of this research is to explore supports that encourage learners participation and retention on a community education course and identify additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

The objectives of the research are:

- To explore what motivates learners to engage in a community education course
- To identify supports that facilitate learners participation and retention on a community education course
- To ascertain what challenges learners experience in participating on a community education course
- To discover what learners on a community education course gained from participating on the course
- To determine additional supports, if any, participants may need to facilitate their progression to third level education

## **1.5 Methodology**

This research is a small in-depth study. A qualitative research method is used. The data is gathered from conducting in depth semi – structured interviews with, a community educator



and a student support and access officer in community education. It is also gathered by conducting a focus group of community learners. In addition data is obtained by reading relevant literature from journals, government and organisations publications and text books accessed through AONTAS, Community Links DIT and the National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), libraries.

Access to participants was facilitated by AONTAS, through the CEN, who identified a community educator and learners who were willing to participate in the study.

There is a thematic analysis of findings, which provides a framework for ordering and synthesising the data gathered. It includes central themes and sub-central themes identified based on the objectives of the research. Figures are used to illustrate information visually.

## **1.6 Definition of Key Terms**

For the purpose of this study ‘support’ refers to the points of interaction, formal or in-formal provided by community education.

‘Disadvantaged background’, for the purpose of this exploration, is defined as per The Education Act, 1998, as “the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefits from education in schools” (Irish Statute Handbook, 2009, Section 32.9).

Within the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) there are two definitions of community education. The first definition is summarised by AONTAS as follows;

*Education that takes place in the community but is not necessarily of the community. This ‘service’ model sees Community Education as a system of provision within the community by a range of institutions including schools, training agencies, universities, churches and others who make premises and resources available locally (AONTAS, 2004, p.18).*

The second definition, asserts community education

*As a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level... it is an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its*

*content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes* (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.110).

‘Third level education’ is defined as education that is post second level education. It is provided by a wide range of institutions in Ireland, the university sector, the technological sector and colleges of education. Third level education offers Levels 6-10 qualifications as per the National Qualifications Authority Framework (NQAF).

## **1.7 Outline of the Research**

Chapter one introduces the dissertation and gives the reader an overview of what is contained therein including; definition of terms, the context of the study, the rationale of the research, the aims of the research, the methodology adopted and definition of terms.

Chapter two presents the literature review, outlining what has been documented on this topic previously and related sociological and psychological theory.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology of the study and discusses the research design and justification for its use, selection of participants, procedure, research instruments, data analysis, limitations of research and ethical considerations.

Chapter four presents the research findings and is divided into themes and sub-themes.

Chapter five offers a discussion of the research findings in relation to the literature reviewed.

Chapter six contains the researcher’s conclusion and recommendations.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided the reader with an overview of the study. The next chapter will review relevant literature.

# **Chapter 2**

## Literature Review

## **2. Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains education disadvantage and the historical perspective in Ireland. It details legislation, strategies and plans relating to widening access and increasing participation. It introduces community education in the context of a life-long learning agenda and models of practice. It outlines previous research carried out and commissioned by AONTAS and community education providers regarding outcomes of community education. The latter section provides an overview of barriers to education and relevant sociological and psychological theory.

### **2.2 Educational Disadvantage**

Educational provision is perceived by some countries as a key means of addressing disadvantage (Kellaghan, Weir, O' hAllachain & Morgan, 1995). Equality of education means, not just equal access, but equal participation and equal achievement for all. In the Irish context the mission of the Department of Education and Skills (DES)<sup>3</sup> is to provide high-quality education, which will, “enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society, and contribute to Ireland’s social, cultural and economic development” (DES, 2002, p.3). In pursuit of this mission, the Department has high level goals. These are:

- *To promote equity and inclusion*
- *To promote quality outcomes*
- *To promote lifelong learning*

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<sup>3</sup> Formally the Department of Education and Science

- *To plan for education that is relevant to personal, social, cultural and economic needs*

(DES, 2002, p.3)

Despite numerous plans, policies and structures dedicated to attaining equality in education, there still persists a proportion of society who continue to be educationally disadvantaged.

The Education Act, 1998, defines educational disadvantage as follows, “[T]he impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage, which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools” (Irish Statute Handbook, 2009, Section 32.9). According to Haran (2004), “appropriate benefit” in this context is understood to mean “the opportunity for each person to achieve their full potential” (Haran, as cited in Mc Keown & Clarke, 2004, p.4).

Kelleghan *et al.*, (1995), considers a range of social and economic variables that may indicate educational disadvantage. These variables relate to both the cause and effect of educational disadvantage and include; poverty, family size and structure, unemployment, socio-economic status, location and school performance.

O’ Brien & O’ Fathaigh (2007), refer to Mc Givney (1996) who provides an adult learning perspective in England and suggests, those most at risk of what is termed as “disadvantage” are individuals such as: people with disabilities, ex-offenders, older adults, people with special needs, ethnic and linguistic minorities, people without qualification and people with literacy and numeracy problems (Mc Givney, cited in O Brien *et al.*, 2007, p.34). In addition to these individuals, O’Brien *et al.*, (2007) adds, those from lower socio-economic groups (SEG), marginalised women’s groups, such as lone parents and those who live in rural areas cut off from key support networks.

Disadvantage is not just viewed as economic, with structural causes being highlighted as the predominant factor in its materialisation. The complex interaction between home, institutions and the community results in some groups deriving less benefit than others from the formal system (O’Brien *et al.*, 2007).

## 2.3 Historical Perspectives

The period between 1950's – 80's saw a growing interest in education by the government and the public, particularly in relation to economic prosperity. During this period free second level education was introduced, and the school leaving age rose to 16 years. By 1992, the percentage of those completing second level education was approaching 80 per cent (Clancy, Drudy, Lynch & O'Dowd, 1995). This almost universal participation in second level education led to a shift in focus to participation in higher education in the 1960's.

There is an array of evidence to suggest that certain individuals and groups are significantly under – represented in education. Bernard (2006) refers to research carried out by Clancy and O'Connell, on the level of representation of SEG's in higher education. This research focuses on data collected from higher education entrants in 1980, 1986, 1992 and 2003. SEG's are identified by the occupation of entrants' fathers. The outcomes of this research indicate rates of participation in third level education have increased for *all* SEG's, in the period 1950-1998. However, it also found “the expansion masked patterns of inequality” by SEG (Clancy and O'Connell cited in Bernard, 2006, p.22). The SEG group farmers, higher professionals, lower professionals, employers and managers and salaried employees, are over represented in surveys, whilst the remainder SEG's, intermediate and other non-manual groups, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, are under-represented. Bernard (2006) suggests these findings are “key” to policy development of access in Ireland and provide a framework and justification for actions to support lower SEG's in accessing higher education (p.22).

In a study titled *Who entered college in 2004?* the authors O'Connell, Clancy and Mc Coy (2006) report a contrast in participation rates of those from lower socio-economic disadvantaged areas. Counties in the west enjoy higher rates of admission to higher education with Sligo topping the poll at 70.5% followed by Galway (67.4%), Kerry (67% and Mayo (66.8%). These findings are in contrast to some disadvantaged areas of Dublin, that are recorded as having the lowest rate of admission at 11.7%, dramatically lower than national averages (O'Connell *et al.*, 2006). These findings indicate that educational disadvantage may be concentrated in particular urban areas.

The notion that economic stability and recovery relies on the participation of all groups in society is reflected in policy and has led to a shift in focus from increased participation in

education to widening of participation to include groups and individuals who have historically been under-represented in the education system. In 2006, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, in a foreword to the Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation, highlighted “People are at the heart of the knowledge society. Success in the future will be strongly dependent on growing the skills of our population” (The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008 – 2013, p. 14). The term “knowledge society” accentuates the fact that economic stability relies on the skills and learning achievements of *all* members of society and not just those who are educationally advantaged. Therefore addressing inequalities in education is imperative for sustaining the economy. This, according to an address by the EU Ministers of Higher Education, includes “the importance of students being able to complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background” (The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008 – 2013, p. 14).

Participation in higher education has increased. The latest figures reported in the mid-term review of The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008 – 2013, indicate a rise in participation of all groups from 11% in 1998 to 55% in 2004 and to 72% in 2010. The latter percentage exceeds the target estimate of 61% for that period. However, the equal access data reflects only marginal increases in participation from target SEG’s in the period 2004 – 2010, which includes non manual, semi-unskilled, students with disabilities and Travellers. Including mature students the total target groups’ new entry percentages has increased participation rates of target SEG’S from 36.6% in 2007 to 37.1% in 2010.

Despite a number of policy responses and access initiatives during a period of economic prosperity and a shift in focus from increased participation in education to widening of participation to include those under-represented in education, there remains a continuing divide between those who access education and those who don’t (O’ Connell *et al.*, 2006; Maxwell & Dorritty, 2009).

## 2.4 Widening Participation

### 2.4.1 Legislation

According to Fleming & Gallagher (2003), the “dual impetus (economic growth and social inclusion) towards change in third level participation...underpins the issue of access across Ireland” (p.7). Skilbeck and Connell (2000) posit widening opportunity for and in higher education contributes to the strengthening of democracy and achieving economic and social progress (Skilbeck *et al.*, cited in Fleming *et al.*, 2003).

Much of the developments relating to equality and access to higher education were brought to the foreground through, The Higher Education Authority Act (1971), The Universities Act (1997) and The Education Act (1998). Under section 3 of The Higher Education Authority Act (1971) the government has responsibility for “promoting the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education” (Skilbeck *et al.*, cited in O’Reilly, 2008, p. 11). The Universities Act (1997) requires higher educators to prepare statements of policies relating to “access ... by economically and socially disadvantaged people, people who have a disability and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body... in all activities of the university” (Irish Statute Book, p.29). The Education Act (1998) acknowledges that inequities in the Irish education system have given rise to the under representation of those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These acts underpin subsequent, legislation, policies and strategies to widen access to higher education. The 1995, White Paper, *Charting our Education Future*, planned for the education system to promote equality of access, participation and benefits for all and recognised additional supports. This includes; increasing school-higher education links, student supports, financial provision and the training of access personnel. This paper focuses on participation as a measure of disadvantage. It also set out targets to increase participation of students from lower SEG’s to 500 annually over 5 years. This paper reflects a shift towards lifelong learning ideals (Maxwell *et al.*, 2009).

Developments in the Adult and Community Education arena were made in the context of a wider lifelong learning agenda. The lifelong learning view created a shift in adult and community education to take on a more prominent role in tackling educational disadvantage. The publishing of the Green Paper (1998), *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*,



followed by, the White Paper (2000), *Learning for Life*, saw adult education as being central to widening participation for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These documents were broadly welcomed across sectors, particularly providers and practitioners in the community sector and are described as a watershed for advancing adult education, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (O'Brien *et al.*, 2007). Additional resources were put in place namely, the recruitment of Community Education Facilitators (CEF), technical support for community education, through the National Adult Learning Council (NALC) and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). The White Paper (2000), *Supporting Voluntary Activity*, focuses on the relationships between the government and voluntary bodies in tackling social exclusion and set up the Department of Community, Rural and Gaelteacht affairs in June 2002. This created a sense of community education as “a piece of the education jigsaw that caters to a particular group of people who are unable to engage with mainstream education” (AONTAS, 2004, p.18).

The 1999, Qualifications Act, is also central to creating opportunities for disadvantaged learners. This act provided for the establishment of the NQAF for non-university education and training awards. The establishment of the NQAF meant any group running a programme can seek accreditation. This provides the architecture to enhance lifelong learning in terms of access, transfer and progression to higher education. Mechanisms for recognising prior and experiential learning are also being developed through the NQAF. This will provide flexible learning and enable progression for adult learners. This Act facilitates the goals of access, transfer and progression (Mernagh, 2003).

Other relevant legislation includes The Equal Status Act (2000), which identifies nine equity groups, The Disabilities Act (2005), The Employment Equality Act (1998) and The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004). These Acts and amended create a framework for encouraging equal access and widening participation in education for under-represented groups (Conway, 2009).

#### **2.4.2 Plans and Strategies**

Widening participation to encourage those who historically are under-represented requires major government investment. The current National Development Plan (NDP) 2008-2013,

has a high level objective through its Student Support/Third Level Access Sub-Programme, which asserts, “by 2013 students with a disability, mature students and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including members of the Travelling Community and refugees, should have adequate opportunities to progress to higher education” (National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2008, p.13). Under this programme €13 billion has been provided to promote inclusion in the higher education sector.

Under the previous NDP, 2000-2006, the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education, was set up to advise the Minister on how to allocate the Third level Access Fund. Its central recommendation saw the establishment of the National Equity Office on Higher Education, which was established in the Higher Education Authority in 2003. The aims of the Authority are to facilitate educational access for groups who are under-represented in higher education. These groups are identified as those who are disadvantaged socially, economically and culturally, mature students and students with a disability. The provision of community education is seen as playing a crucial role in facilitating access for these under-represented groups.

## **2.5 Community Education**

### **2.5.1 The Evolution of Community Education in Ireland**

Adult education developed alongside local women’s community education groups in the late 1970’s, with the support of the Vocational Educational Committee (VEC) sector, in response to the high levels of exclusion, unemployment and poverty. In 1969, AONTAS was established with a remit to examine the nature of adult education in Ireland and make recommendations. Funding was scarce however, the Adult Literacy and Community Education Scheme (ALCES) budget sustained adult education services throughout the 1980’s (AONTAS, 2004).

In 1986, the Combat Poverty Agency was established with a remit to support anti- poverty initiatives and networks and make recommendations to the Government on social and economic planning (AONTAS, 2004). Local people were facilitated to come together in groups to address social exclusion, disadvantage and lack of services. According to

AONTAS (2004), this was the beginning of a new movement in Adult Education and what we now call Community Education.

Progress in the 1990's saw continued developments and initiatives aimed at addressing educational disadvantage, such as, local Community Development Programmes, the Education Equality Initiative and the BTEI<sup>4</sup>. The latter is a funding stream for community education groups, which enables them to offer flexible options for adults with less than upper second level education returning to learning. 10% of the overall budget for BTEI is delivered through community education with the remainder through VEC's. This era saw a broad range of provision suited to a range of educational needs. The success of these initiatives is said to lie in the range of support available to learners including child care, allowances and personal support (AONTAS, 2004).

### **2.5.2 Defining Community Education**

Defining community education is a challenge. Within the White Paper on Adult Education exist two definitions. The first definition is summarised by AONTAS as follows;

*Education that takes place in the community but is not necessarily of the community. This 'service' model sees Community Education as a system of provision within the community by a range of institutions including schools, training agencies, universities, churches and others who make premises and resources available locally (AONTAS, 2004, p.18).*

The second definition, asserts community education

*As a process of communal education towards empowerment, both at an individual and collective level... it is an interactive, challenging process, not only in terms of its content but also in terms of its methodologies and decision making processes (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.110).*

Whilst both processes may result in the acquisition of skills and knowledge, it is the underpinning principle of social change, critical reflection and collective outcomes that distinguish between the two definitions.

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<sup>4</sup> Back to Education Initiative

Learning in community education is formal and informal and can be accredited or non accredited learning, through the VEC supported BTEI community strand and the ALCES budget. It also features in other independent community education groups funded through a variety of funding streams (AONTAS, 2011). AONTAS estimates there are over 1,000 community groups providing learning throughout Ireland.

There is no formal comprehensive national database of statistics for participation in adult and community education courses. Neither are there statistics available regarding the numbers of community learners who progress to third level. However, a recently published study of outcomes and impact of DES funded community education indicates that of the 181 learners who responded, 78% express a desire to progress to third level (Bailey, 2010, p. 163).

### **2.5.3 Models of Community Education**

Different models and approaches have emerged in different locations which respond to a variety of needs. However, what they all have in common is the focus and interest in addressing the educational needs of those who are disadvantaged.

Bailey (2010) refers to Jarvis and Griffin, analysis of four models of community education. (See Figure 1 overleaf). The first approach sees community education as an extension of the formal system and is functional. The second approach is similar and focuses on the provision of a service to address local needs, whereas, the latter two approaches sees community education as addressing social exclusion and a tool for change at personal and communal levels through collective action. The latter definitions offer a more radical approach to education and are in contrast with the liberal approach of the education system.

A key difference within both responses is how the problem of exclusion is defined. According Ryan and O' Brien (2001) a liberal approach assumes the formal system is the most desirable medium for the delivery of education and that exclusion is due to a set of 'unfortunate circumstances' such as lack of motivation to participate, little encouragement, financial hardships and fear of failure. This is emphasised through its access initiatives aimed at "mature students...special needs...older students...and non-traditional students" (Ryan *et al.*, 2001, p. 38:39). Access initiatives locate the problem within these groups and offer support to these groups rather than focusing on the perpetual inequalities within the

system. According to Lynch (1999), this approach only serves to bring “limited gain for the relatively advantaged among the disadvantaged” (Lynch, cited in Ryan *et al.*, 2001, p.38).

Figure 1: Community Education Models

Model	Description
Community organisation/education	Liberal model- It brings education to the people in their own surroundings on their own terms. Content could be purely for individual development such as vocational training, outreach from third level institution or larger adult education centre. Tutor is organiser. For any community member.
Community development/education	Liberal/reform model - local affairs work closely with local groups to improve local problems. Where opportunity arises educator provides more systematic learning arising from community needs and /or is a resource to the community. Learners/educators educate service providers to local area about community needs and wants. For any community member
Community action/education	Educational process from Freire for local change – community action as an educational, process. Radical political education to see how broader societal arrangements impact on the local with some instrumental education. Educators link personal to political. Focus on local solutions as opposed to broader social change. For working class community members
Social action/education	Working class education. Structured education provision, which strengthens the working class to take on a broader social change agenda, i.e. political economy. Educators act in solidarity with community.

(Jarvis and Griffin. cited in Bailey, 2010, p.67)

The radical response is characterized by its concern to tackle reasons for social exclusion and locates the problem of exclusion within educational structures. It recognises institutions as exercising preferences in terms of social, cultural, economic and gender that are reflected in the ideologies and values of the education system (Ryan *et al.*, (2001). A radical approach seeks to determine these reasons and acknowledges the need for fundamental structural reform in order to address inequality.

The outcomes of research carried out by Bailey (2010) suggest that DES funded community education implement a number of different models or a “hybrid approach”, made up of community organisation and community development models (Bailey, 2010, p.17). That is, community education is brought to the community to address needs and combat social exclusion and foster personal development. Therefore, it “does not usually extend to action for social change” (Bailey, 2010, p.17).

Bailey (2011) continued the investigation into outcomes. This research was conducted with community education providers who aspire to the social action model. This research found that generally the social change model brings about more frequent attainment of outcomes in terms of, reaching disadvantaged learners, social recognition and attention to barriers, critical reflection, experiential learning and community development and social change. From this research it is clear that the social change model provides the tools that foster a critical voice for learners to engage in the world around them.

#### **2.5.4 Research Outcomes of Community Education**

Bailey (2010) refers to a number of research documents that highlight supports/incentives, barriers and motivation of adult learners who participate in community and adult education. Figure 2 overleaf is a table of combined results compiled by Bailey (2010, p. 106).

In this table supports are targeted to those who are traditionally disadvantaged groups. Flexible learning is provided and involves the provision of courses at times that suit the participants' needs and responsibilities in terms of caring duties. This table highlights the range and complexity of motivators, situational, dispositional, institutional and informational barriers that disadvantaged groups experience and supports and incentives that are provided to these groups.

Findings of research by Bailey (2010; 2011) regarding outcomes and impact of community education, both indicate similar findings. The main motivators for people engaging in courses are for social interaction, followed by having fun, getting more involved in the community and improving self confidence. The findings of the 2011 research mirror the top three findings in the earlier 2010 research, in terms of supports necessary and provided. These, in order of frequency are; a warm welcoming environment, experience of dignity and respect and appropriate timing of course. The main barriers identified to participation were lack of confidence, family commitments and job commitments similar to dispositional, situational and financial barriers documented by Cross (1981) (cited in O'Brien *et al.*, 2007).

Figure 2 Facilitating Participation in Community Education<sup>5</sup>

Support / Incentives	Barriers	Motivation
Flexible Learning	Job commitments	Desire for social interaction (c)
Choice of learning methods (c)	Lack of transport (c)	Doing a better job
Receiving accreditation	Family commitments lack of childcare	Become more involved in the community (c)
Access to tailored information and advice (c)	Lack of confidence (c)	Obtaining certificate/diploma, qualification
Face to face outreach worker supported them to go from home to centre (c)	Negative attitudes friends/family (c)	Achieving more personal satisfaction
Funding for childcare/transport (c)	Lack of access to guidance information and advice (c)	Increasing more personal satisfaction
Free fees (c)	Live register criteria (c)	Increasing general knowledge
Provision of a safe place (c)	Self financing rule (c)	Acquiring specific skills
Experience of dignity and respect for learner (c)	Cost of courses (c)	
Peer support/mentoring in the learning setting (c)	Literacy challenges (c)	
Timing of courses (c)	Threat to leisure	
‘Check ins’ with learner to see how they are getting on (c)	Perceived as being too old	
Welcoming atmosphere (c)	Not enough places on programmes	
Face to face outreach worker		
Individualised study plans (adapted to needs)		
Face to face outreach worker		

(Bailey, 2010, p.106)

*Source:* <sup>5</sup> From a number of sources. Owens, (2000) men on the move a study of barriers to male participating in education and training. AONTAS, Dublin. And WERRC, (2001) Women at the Forefront: the role of Women’s education Groups in combating poverty and disadvantage. AONTAS, Dublin. And CEDEFOP (2004) Lifelong learning: citizens’ views in close-up. Findings from a dedicated Eurobarometer survey, CEDEFOP: Brussels. In Bailey, N., (2010). Those that have been described for community education have a ‘c’ next to them.

Overall Baileys' (2010; 2011) findings suggest that community education is effective at removing barriers for disadvantaged groups and individuals and produces broader learning benefits, such as health and social civic benefits, suggesting investment in community education can decrease government spending in other areas and can contribute to a fairer and more equal society.

## **2.6 Barriers to Higher Education**

Barriers to education for non traditional learners have been well documented. A study by Lynch and O' Riordan (1999) broadly identifies economic, social and cultural and educational constraints as principal barriers to equality of access and participation in higher education for all learners coming from a lower SEG's. A report commissioned by AONTAS in 2003, also agrees that these conceptual points represent barriers to higher education for adult learners and add personal/dispositional and contextual barriers (King, O' Driscoll & Holden, 2003).

The work of Cross (1981) has been most influential in providing a theoretical framework for institutional, situational and informational barriers for these groups (Cross, cited in O'Brien *et al.*, 2007). Institutional constraints are related to the policies and procedures of higher education and include, the style of teaching, the timetables, policies regarding cost of courses and other practices and procedures that exclude disadvantage learners. Situational constraints are constraints that are beyond the learners control and are those related to impairments, language, childcare or other caring duties, lack of time, transport and financial constraints. Informational barriers include available, reliable and appropriate information on the range of courses and services available. Dispositional barriers are negative attitudes and experiences of education, learning seen as irrelevant, lack of confidence and self-esteem. Contextual barriers are third level policy stances towards educational disadvantage and cultural role pressures such as, men needing to "earn instead of learn" (O'Brien *et al.*, 2007, p.58). According to Lynch (1999) each of these constraints represents barriers to equality of education and are experienced by those from lower SEG's.



## 2.7 Sociological Theories

The work of Lynch in equality and education is highly influential in conceptualising the inequalities that exist in education. In a study carried out by Lynch *et al.*, (1999) titled *Inequality in Higher education : A study of social class barriers*, Lynch *et al.*, (1999) claim “one of the most enduring theoretical models purporting to explain social class related inequalities in education is structuralism” (p.89).

Structuralism has similar meaning from both a Marxist and Functionalist perspective. Traditional Marxists work from a model of economic determinism, which sees the role of education reproducing class inequalities as inevitable. Functionalists, work from a Durkheim model of educational choice. Both talk similarly about class outcomes in terms of stratification in the labour market. The difference between perspectives is functionalists see this stratification as necessary for the maintenance of social order in society whereas, a Marxist view interprets outcomes as injustices that need to be overcome.

In Lynch’s *et al.*, (1999) attempt to discover why only a small number of working class students transfer to higher education, a broader structuralist approach is used. This concept views the state as dynamic and responsive to contexts and partners, collective and individual agents, with the central role of producing and reproducing inequalities (Coolahan, 1994). These conditions are set by institutional (cultural and educational) values and ideologies, which informs individual choice. Therefore the state plays a role in the educational outcomes of individuals. Lynch *et al.*, (1999), claim, identifying particularities of structural class – specific constraints, indicates where “transformative action is possible and necessary” (p.96). Specific constraints are firstly, economic constraints, which although do not originate in education, impact on educational decisions. Secondly are, institutional constraints, relating to the institutes that deliver education and how this is organised and third, cultural constraints, which arises from conflict between the world of students and the organisational culture of institutions (Lynch *et al.*, 1999). The authors note that economic constraints are the overriding obstacle to equality of opportunity, defined in terms of equality and access and participation (Lynch *et al.*, 1999).

The human capital theory suggests individuals can make a value added contribution to the economy via their own training and education (O’Brien *et al.*, 2007). The “human capital

priority” reflects the importance Government attaches to maintaining an educated, skilled and adaptable labour force in Ireland and highlights “the competitiveness of the Irish economy depends on a well-functioning labour market” (NDP, 2008, pp. 189:190). Community education plays a role in applying this theory to practice through its principles and is committed to meeting the needs of adult learners and tackling social and educational disadvantage. The application of community education supports such as, flexible provision, welcoming environment and financial aid is found to have a multitude of benefits including the development of human and social capital (see, Bailey, 2010; 2011, Power, Neville & O’Dwyer, 2011).

O’Brien *et al.*, (2007) argue “Investment in social capital ... acts as a kind of strategy which (unconsciously or otherwise) further serves as a mechanism to exchange other capitals” (p.8). Kilpatrick, Field & Falk, (2003) suggest group membership in networks (such as community education) generate secondary benefits including, trust and knowledge which in turn generate reciprocity and cooperation and leads to the generation of capitals such as social, cultural, human and economic capitals as enjoyed by the more educationally advantaged.

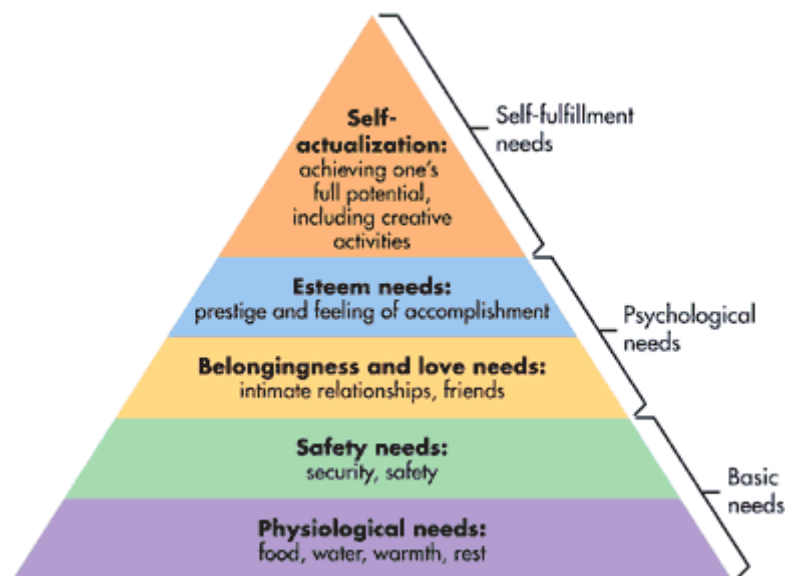
## **2.8 Psychological Theory**

Many theories relating to motivation and adult learning maintain that adults are naturally motivated to learn (Ahl, 2006).

In 1954, Maslow proposed a hierarchy of human needs as a means of determining what motivates people to do certain things and behave in certain ways. Maslow divides human needs into two groups; deficiency needs and growth needs. Maslow groups deficiency needs into four levels which includes; basic needs such as, physiological needs and safety needs and psychological needs such as, belonging and self esteem (Huitt, 2007). Deficiency needs are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy with growth needs placed at the top. In terms of adult learners growth needs, these may be the ability and confidence of learners to apply newfound knowledge, information and skills and the will to better themselves, which in turn leads to individuals becoming more involved in their community and society.

According to Maslow, deficiency needs must first be met, when met, the individual is then in a position to move upwards to the next level of the hierarchy. If a deficiency need is not being satisfied the individual will temporarily re-prioritize the lower set of needs no longer being met (Chao, 2009). Figure 3 illustrates the hierarchy.

Figure 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs



(<http://markmarshall.edublogs.org/>)

Norman and Hyland (2003) argue that motivation difficulties arise from various dispositional, situational and structural barriers and suggest if such barriers were removed adults would be motivated to engage with education. Chao (2009) suggests that motivation and barriers to adult learning are “created, formed and changed in two spaces; the individual learner and the socio-environment” (p.905). Chao (2009) concludes understanding motivation and barriers facing learners enables educators to gain a better understanding of the adult learner and assists in discovering ways to motivate and remove these barriers.

In practical terms community education must consider the deficiency and growth needs of learners, take into account dispositional, situational and structural barriers and strive to create a number of conditions in order for learners to reach their full potential.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a review of the literature which underpins this study. It detailed the historical view of educational disadvantage and barriers to access in Ireland. It looked at responses in terms of access and identifies community education as one approach in tackling educational disadvantage. It reviewed related sociological and psychological theory in the context of participation in education. The next chapter will outline the methodology used in this research.

# **Chapter 3**

## Methodology

## **3. Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The focus of this enquiry is to explore supports that facilitate participation and retention of learners on a community education course and identify additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore what motivates learners to participate in a community education course
- To identify supports that facilitate learners participation and retention on a community education course
- To ascertain what challenges learners experience in participating on a community education course
- To discover what learners on a community education course gained from participating on the course
- To determine additional supports, participants may need to facilitate their progression to third level education

These objectives will determine the nature of the research paradigm necessary to undertake this study.

The research was carried out between May 2012 and August 2012. A total of six people participated in this study and included; four community learners, one community educator and a student support access officer in community education.

### **3.2 Research Strategy**

The methodology links a particular philosophy to the appropriate research methods. The philosophical approach, or the paradigm, provides the basis on which we build our verifiable knowledge (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001). This research is explorative in nature and for this purpose the overarching perspective that shapes this research is phenomenology.

There are two distinct philosophical approaches to research these are positivism and phenomenology. Both these approaches shape the way we think about research. Positivism is synonymous with science or positive observable fact, based on measurable variables and provable fact (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). In contrast, the phenomenological approach focuses on understanding the meaning of events for the people being studied (Maykut *et al.*, 1994). This approach to inquiry includes qualitative research and areas of inquiry in ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutic inquiry, naturalist inquiry, ethnography and grounded theory (Patton, cited in Maykut *et al.*, 1994).

Qualitative research develops insights and understandings from patterns in the data rather than assessing data using predetermined theories and concepts. Qualitative research and methods of data collection lends its-self to generating explanations that are grounded in the reality of peoples experiences, therefore providing an understanding of supports that encourage participation and retention on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education. This type of research was seen as more appropriate than a large scale quantitative approach, which would have been unable to provide for qualitative exploration into the experiences and meaning for learners participating in community education.

### **3.3 Research Design**

Qualitative research is concerned with the depth rather than the breath of information. It is explorative in nature, therefore asks questions such as “who...why...how?” (Maykut *et al.*, 1994, p.45), regarding participants lived experience. The outcome of these questions provides “a deeper understanding of experiences from the perspectives of the participants selected for the study” (Maykut *et al.*, 1994, p.44). A qualitative approach is very much in

line with the philosophy of community education which places the participants and their experience at the centre (Connolly, 2003a, p.11).

Methods typically utilised in a qualitative approach are interviews, case studies, focus groups, observation and documentary analysis. For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews with a community educator and the student support access officer and a focus group with four community education learners is undertaken.

### **3.4 Sampling and Entry to the Field**

All persons selected to participate in this research were purposely selected, based on their experience and/or participation in community education and desire to progress to third level education.

Purposive sampling “increases the likelihood that variability common in any social phenomenon will be represented in the data” (Denscombe, 2007, p.45). To achieve “maximum variation”, learners in community education were selected on the basis of their expressed desire to progress to third level and their experience and knowledge of community education (Maykut *et al.*, 1994, p.58). Likewise, one community educator, and a student support access officer were selected based on their knowledge/expertise and experiences of community education. This variation of sample is thought to have provided rich information on what supports facilitate learners participation and retention on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

The researcher was supported with access to participants through AONTAS and Community Links DIT. AONTAS, through the CEN<sup>6</sup>, circulated the researcher’s letter outlining the nature of the proposed research, the planned methodology, the role of AONTAS and Community Links DIT in the research and the perceived potential benefits of such research (see appendix 1). Interested parties were asked to contact the researcher by email. It was originally anticipated that a focus group of educators would form part of this qualitative research however, due to lack of response and time pressures of both educators and the researcher, one individual interview with a community educator was agreed upon. This

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<sup>6</sup> Community Education Network



community educator provided access to a group who were willing to voluntarily participate in this research. The researcher made telephone contact with the educator, to ensure the educator and the group met the criteria for the research. The researcher then met with the community educator to explain the research. The community educator then agreed to inform the learners about the research and to ascertain their interest in taking part in a focus group. Of twelve learners consulted by the community educator, four learners took part in the research. Access to the student support access officer was gained through the community educator and initial contact was made by telephone.

In order to gain an in-depth exploration of supports and additional supports, it was originally anticipated that interviews with former learners of a community education course, who were currently engaged with third level education, would be conducted. However, despite contact being made by email accessed through Community Links DIT and a large response, no respondents met the criteria of accessing third level education through community education.

### **3.4.1 Research Participants**

#### ***Participants***

Two centre staff were selected for semi-structured interviews, a community educator and a student support access officer. Both staff members facilitate direct delivery of the course content to the learners of the focus group. In addition to the role of course delivery the student support access officer is also involved in career planning, assisting in access of information, liaising and advocating on behalf of participants and creating and maintaining links to local resources, further and third level education and other support services.

Participants in the focus group were identified through the community educator. At the time of data collection these focus group participants were completing a ten week community education course.

### ***Profile of Centre***

For the purpose of confidentiality of participants and in agreement with the community education centre, the name of the centre will not be used, however an outline of service is provided. This education centre is located in a disadvantaged area in North Dublin. It is situated in close proximity to Dublin City University (DCU). This centre describes itself as community based adult education. Its mission is to provide educational opportunities to local people in North Dublin in order to increase participation levels and to promote equality in third level education. Their aim is to broaden access and increase participation in higher education. The centre provides a range of supports and includes; free course placements, retention of social welfare payments, access to computers and printers, free course materials, information and advice, links to local services and other relevant initiatives and a number of flexible courses to encourage people to return to education.

The course the learners are participating in at this centre is a 10 week course designed to build confidence and study skills to return to education. The course includes modules on maths, English and communications. It runs on three days per week and lasts 4 hours per day. Due to funding difficulties this course is non-accredited, but is suggested by the community educator to be of similar level to a Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) Level 4. Provision of this service is facilitated by a development officer, a student support access officer, community educators, (employed on a sessional basis), administration staff and volunteers.

### **3.5 Research Instruments**

Qualitative research requires the collection of in-depth understanding of experiences and meanings and for this purpose instruments used to collect data are a focus group and two semi-structured interviews. Using more than one method of data collection should lead to increased reliability of the findings (Byrman, 2008).

### 3.5.1 Focus Group

Given that community education focuses on group involvement, conducting focus groups with community education learners enabled the researcher to examine the norms and practices of the formed group in question.

Focus groups are designed to use group dynamics to yield insights and meanings, which may not be discovered without the kind of interaction found in a group. (Morgan, cited in Maykut *et al.*, 1994, p.114) In the focus group the researcher took on the role as moderator, and used a non direct approach. Denscombe (2007, p.180), provides a useful summary of three distinctive and vital points regarding focus groups:

- *There is a focus to the session, with the group discussion based on experience about which all participants have similar knowledge*
- *Particular emphasis is placed on the interaction within the groups as a means of eliciting information*
- *The moderators role is to facilitate the group interaction*

The researcher used an interview guide to retain focus (see appendix 2). The participants were also asked to complete a small questionnaire, which asked closed questions in relation to their social background (see appendix 3). This information sought to build a profile of learner participants. After discussing the formalities of the groups, the discussion began by asking non-controversial questions aimed at making participants comfortable with talking and sharing, such as “Are you enjoying the course?”, followed by questions contained in the interview guide. This careful attention to the ordering of questions is said to “increase the likelihood of a productive interview” (Maykut *et al.*, 1994, p.94).

During the focus group, participants were encouraged to discuss the topic amongst themselves. This helped the researcher to understand the reasoning and meaning behind the views and opinions expressed, in other words not just the why? but the how? In some instances the open questions yielded little response and questions were rephrased, for example asking the question “What supports do you need to progress to third level?” produced limited data, however when rephrasing the question to “What needs to happen for you to be able to make the leap to third level education?” yielded a more elaborative response (see appendix 4).

Probes are used as a tool to delve deeper into learners experiences and meanings and provided a range of opinions, views, and consensus regarding, what supports these community education learners felt help them to participate and remain on the course and what additional supports were needed for them to progress to third level education. Details of probes used are not recorded in the interview guide as they are used only as the need arose, however probes used are recorded in sample transcripts (see appendix 4).

An assistant was voluntarily recruited to record observations and assist with the audio recording. This role was clearly outlined at the beginning of the focus group. The assistant also completed a consent form.

Disadvantages of using this type of data collection, is the time it takes to transcribe the data. However, the researcher felt the benefits far outweigh this disadvantage. This method also raises some ethical questions regarding confidentiality, as discussed in the ethics section.

### **3.5.2 Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews are described as conversations with a purpose (Berg, Dexter, Lincoln and Guba, cited in Maykut *et al*, 1994). Characteristics of in-depth interviews are the depth of the discourse and the way it moves beyond the surface to a deeper discussion of thoughts and feelings. Maykut *et al*, (1994), cite Bogdan and Biklen (1982) who found in-depth interviewing, in their research to be a “fruitful method” for better understanding life for students on a college campus (p.80).

An interview guide was used with a broad framework of questions, this helped to keep the focus of enquiry in mind (see appendix 5). Also, this structured aspect allowed the generation of more specific and comparable data between interviews and the focus group.

Questions in the interviews are open-ended in nature to allow the participant to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions. According to Denscombe (2007) the advantages of open ended questions is that the responses are more likely to reflect “the full richness of the views held by the respondents” (p.166). Probes were also utilised to help elaborate on detail and aid clarification (Patton, cited in Maykut, 2000).

All interviews were conducted one to one and participants were given advance notice of the purpose of the research, the broad categories of inquiry and why they are being interviewed. Interviews took place in the educators and students support access officer's place of work.

### **3.5.3 Piloting**

Piloting of the interview guides for the semi-structured interviews and the focus group were conducted in May 2012, with a community educator and two past learners of a community education course. Haralambos and Holborn (2000) describe a pilot study as a preliminary study carried out on a small scale, prior to conducting the main study and suggest it may help determine the viability of the methodology and/or indicate areas of improvement. In this research, piloting the interview guides enabled the researcher to review and modify questions for example, asking the focus group "What motivated you to engage in community education?" was changed to "Why did you get involved with the course?." In response to feedback the sequence of some questions changed for both the semi-structured interviews and the focus group.

## **3.6 Data Analysis**

There was a sequential order for data collection which began with the focus group of learners, followed by the interview with the community educator and finally the interview with the student support officer. This enabled the researcher to collect data and analysis systematically and sequentially as soon as they were perceived.

The initial stages of analysis involved listening to audio data from interviews and the focus group, several times before being transcribed. This enabled the researcher to recall observations, feelings, gestures and silences. These annotations were recorded and later served to provide richer meaning to the spoken words. Memos and the research assistants field notes, also aided this process.

Transcribing data assisted in identifying themes and sub-themes. The process of transcribing brought the researcher "close to the data" (Denscombe, 2007, p.196). Patterns in the data

emerged and were divided into themes and sub-themes. For example, ‘supports’ developed as a theme and ‘a welcome environment’ became a sub-theme, followed by ‘safe learning environment’ and ‘physical location of centre’ (see appendix 4). Themes and sub-themes were compared for similarities and differences.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Participants in both focus groups and interviews were sent a letter by email broadly outlining the research inquiry, the role of AONTAS and Community Links DIT in the research and seeking their voluntary participation (see appendix 1).

All participants in both focus groups and interviews were asked to sign a consent form (see appendix 6). All consent forms were signed by participants as proof they were informed of and agreed to the following;

- Statement and purpose of research
- The outcome of the results
- The reason they are being interviewed
- Their name and other identifying details will not be disclosed in the research
- Direct quotes may be used
- The interviewer/ assistant will take notes for observation purposes
- The interview/focus group will be recorded and uploaded on to a locked PC file, with access only to the researcher
- All audio data will be disposed of as per DIT guidelines

The issue of confidentiality in focus groups raises ethical questions (Denscombe, 2007). No guarantee can ever be given that participants will never discuss information disclosed in the group to outside of the group. Therefore, to increase the likelihood of “mutual trust” the researcher explicitly stated, as part of the formalities at the beginning of the session and again at the end, the need to respect and treat in confidence the information shared in the group (Denscombe, 2007, p.183). An offer of support was also made to individuals who

participated in the focus group if they felt uncomfortable regarding information or issues that arose, however, no participants availed of this support.

### **3.8 Limitations**

This research is small scale due to the researchers' time constraints and lack of availability of community educators and community learners during the time the study was undertaken. Therefore the study only represents a small number of individuals. The research is a qualitative account of peoples' meanings, definitions, perspectives and constructions and has no absolute claim on scientific truth or being the only version of the way things are. In this case they are located in the particular cultural and historical situations of the participants involved in the research and findings only represent those who engage in community education in this centre (Ezzy, 2002).

### **3.9 Conclusion**

This chapter described the research strategy and methods used by the researcher and justifications for choice. The chapter identified the sample used and detailed how access and entry was gained. It detailed research instruments, method of data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations of the research. The next chapter focuses on the findings of the research.

# **Chapter 4**

## Findings



## 4. Chapter 4: Findings

### 4.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore supports that facilitate participation and retention of learners on a community education course and identify additional supports needed to progress to third level education. In order to provide a detailed analysis the researcher explored the learner's motivation for engaging in community education, supports that facilitated their retention and participation, challenges experienced in participating, outcomes of participating and additional supports needed by learners to progress to third level education.

Analysis of data collected from interviews with the community educator, the student support access officer and the focus group of learners has been thematically correlated under five themed headings. Within these themes are sub themes which featured across all or most of the participants' responses (see appendix 3). These headings are:

- 1) Motivation for participating in a community education course
- 2) Supports that facilitate participation and retention
- 3) Challenges faced while participating on the course
- 4) What learners gained from participating on the course
- 5) Additional supports needed to progress to third level education

The identities' of participants in both the interviews and the focus group are confidential and for this purpose data labels are allocated.

Figure 4: Research Data Labels

Data Type	Data Label
Focus Group	FG
Community Educator	CE
Student Support and Access Officer (in community education)	SS

The next section will begin by identifying the learner participants' profile.

## 4.2 Profile Of Learner Participants

Four learners participated in the focus group. The gender of learners was split evenly and all stated Irish as their nationality with the exception of one who was originally from the UK and has spent a significant period living in Ireland. All learners are aged between 24 and 40 years, with the average age of 33years, which deems them mature students, for the purpose of third level education. 50% of participants completed education to a Leaving Certificate standard. The remaining learners indicated their highest educational achievement as Intermediate/Group Certificate and primary school. All learners were, at the time of data collection, unemployed and in receipt of social welfare in the form of a back to education allowance. All learners had children and one parent indicated they were parenting alone. No learners indicated they were living in rural Ireland, a member of the Travelling Community or other ethnic minority group, an ex offender or had a registered disability.

Figure 5: Participant Profile

Participant	Sex	Nationality	Age	Educational Achievement	Employment Status	Children
1	M	Irish	24-65	Leaving Cert.	Unemployed	Yes
20	F	Irish	24-65	Leaving Cert.	Unemployed	Yes *(PA)
3	M	Irish	24-65	Inter/Group Cert.	Unemployed	Yes
4	F	Not of Irish origin	24-65	Primary	Unemployed	Yes

\*Parenting alone

## 4.3 Motivation for Participating in a Community Education Course

### 4.3.1 Negative Feelings

The most prominent theme emerging from the data regarding motivation is learners' experience of feelings of, isolation, lack of purpose and boredom, prior to participating on the course, which led them to consider returning to education. This finding was validated by the SS.

FG: *Me job went into liquidation so I just started getting into the habit of staying at home. The more I think I stayed out of work then I started saying ah, I don't know what I'm gonna do like*

FG: *I've been isolated a lot*

FG: *It beats sitting at home and your mind baffled*

SS: *What motivates people is having a sense of purpose, they have to get up and be somewhere in the morning...sometimes it's boredom as well, people come in here and they say, well I'm not doing anything at the moment, I'm just taking care of my kid or a family member... they might be doing something, but they think, I'm not really doing anything...*

These feelings and motivation for participation on the course may be attributed to the fact that all participants of the focus group had been unemployed for at least a period of 2 years prior to participating on the course.

#### **4.3.2 Meeting New People**

As a means of addressing these feelings and creating a sense of purpose in their lives, learners felt the need to meet new people, particularly groups.

FG: *For me personally it's mixing with groups of people again*

FG: *It's not just about the learning... you know most of my life a lot of stuff that went on would have been very hard ... it's a stepping stone for me, the main thing for me is to get back into the classroom rather than the work (course), to come into a class and yap away to people*

#### **4.3.3 Develop Job Related Skills and Knowledge**

Of lesser importance, but still notable, learners felt that attending the course would help them gain knowledge and skills that could be beneficial in the workforce.

FG: *To help build myself up properly, the education and probably a better job*

FG: *I wanna try education to see what I can do*

FG: *I've only been a general operative working in warehouses...some of us would like the opportunity to give other things a try*

#### **4.3.4 Support Children's learning**

In addition, to these motivational factors, half of those with children express a desire to be a positive role model to their children.

FG: *I kinda focused everything around the child; I wanted to learn as a parent like*

The CE validated this finding and added the learners desire to be able to assist with their children's learning.

CE: *If they have young children at home and they want to set a good example, ye know, if the children at home see Mammy or Daddy studying they will know it must be good*

CE: *To help children with their homework...basic skills of addition, division, subtraction...*

The CE concluded it is a combination of these factors that has led to the timing being right for these learners to participate on the course

CE: *Maybe something for themselves at this stage of their lives...now they may find the timing is right for them*

### **4.4 Supports that Encourage Learners Participation and Retention**

There are four main themes relating to supports that were found to encourage learners' participation and retention on this community education course. In order of frequency these were; the teaching style, the supportive nature of learning in a group, a welcome environment and financial supports.

#### **4.4.1 Teaching Style**

The support found to be of most significance to learners was the teaching style of the tutor, in particular the way the tutor was able to break information down to manageable pieces and the way the tutor related learning to everyday life experiences.

FG: *It looks like really childish stuff but when you get to do it its important, cutting pictures out of papers and putting sentences to them, it really gets your mind working*

*again, I mean you will see a picture and you breeze over it, now we are putting stuff to it ourselves and writing our own paragraphs and stuff, it's good that way*

*FG: Some people in the course they were sitting there for about an hour and after the hour, they were like, I didn't even hear one word you said, but she (CE) just stopped and said, let's take your bills or apples and oranges and we do it this way, so it's really good*

*FG: And everyone just got it straight away*

*FG: You use maths, what ye learn for every day like, 20% off clothes*

#### **4.4.2 Learning in a Group**

Learner groups were generally made up of no more than fifteen learners and were divided into smaller groups within the classroom. The SS claims encouraging learners to seek support from group members is a *very important* part of the community education approach.

*SS: Learners are encouraged to discuss things amongst themselves...the teaching approach is very much collaborative...people learning from one another... we try to be quite interactive*

Learning in groups was found to promote the development of supportive relationships, learning and confidence building.

*FG: I'm getting a good dig out from everyone*

*FG: Everybody is helping each other and we have learnt how to do Powerpoint if someone is stuck, ye, you get help from the group*

#### **4.4.3 A Welcome Environment**

##### ***Safe Learning Environment***

In response to the question, "In what ways does community education support learners?" the SS suggested the provision of a safe environment is a major supportive factor for learners.

*SS: We are trying to provide a safe environment where people can learn and be supportive of each other... I think if you give people a safe place to exchange ideas and to learn the confidence is going to grow*

The provision of a safe environment is demonstrated by ensuring learners are familiar with all staff members and their availability, outlining ground rules and expectations in terms of mutual respect, reinforcing that “there are no stupid questions” and promoting the centre as a friendly, positive environment, where people listen and support each other (SS).

Learners defined the safe environment in terms of how welcome they experienced the centre and the staff, feeling they were cared for and knowing they could ask for help.

*FG: They really care, like they don't force themselves on ye. It's not like a dictatorship were you come in here and they are telling you what to do. You nearly have the run of the place and they will do anything for you like ...coming back in the evenings or any day... it's great like*

*FG: It's like they look out for ye*

*FG: You don't feel like a number ...ye feel they take you seriously*

*CE: They come to me a lot before class, during class and after class...and the student support person they can come back to her at any stage and do extra homework or help them line up their portfolio or whatever*

*FG: You can come back whenever you like, like its opened all week, so you feel free to come in ...to use computers if you need help the SS is always there*

### ***Physical Location of Centre***

The SS also suggested that because the centre is based in the community this also creates a sense of safety a place where learners feel they belong.

*SS: It is very important that it is a local resource... we wouldn't have much buy in if it was not located in the community, there is still a huge divide between the university and the community or how the university is viewed in the community. It's viewed as an ivory tower, something intimidating, people think the campus is not for us, we don't belong there...people feel a little bit safer in their own neighbourhood*

*FG: I think that's why we all got on is because we are all from the same area and we have all grown up in the same kind of thing it brings us all close*

*FG: You are in your own community and you feel comfortable*

#### **4.4.4 Financial Supports**

All learners were unemployed for a period of at least two years. Learners' were availing of a back to education allowance, a social welfare payment. This also means learners do not lose any secondary benefits including medical card and rent allowance. Although no major discussion took place regarding this financial support, there was a unanimous agreement that learners would not be in a position to participate if they did not receive this support.

*FG: I wouldn't have the money to pay or come to the course if I didn't get social welfare*

### **4.5 Challenges Faced While Participating on the Course**

#### **4.5.1 Academic difficulty**

The main challenge pertaining to participating on the course, according to learner participants, was the level of difficulty of the course work.

*FG: I thought it was very hard*

*FG: I was just thinking of jacking it in and going for an easier course - an access to this course, I wanted something a little easier*

*FG: I think it's an awful lot harder (than school)*

*FG: A bit less work so that's the only downfall of the course*

#### **4.5.2 Doing Homework**

Participants of the focus group felt completing homework and assignments at home were difficult tasks and attributed these difficulties to commitments outside of the course.

*FG: I always do me homework in class cause if I go home I have a child, I will just forget about it*

FG: *I'm finding it very difficult but (to complete homework at home), I have personal stuff going on at home*

The interview with the SS reinforces this finding.

SS: *I think maybe participants when they went home they take care of their family or whatever they need to sort out in their personal life rather than sitting down and writing an assignment and homework*

#### **4.5.3 Confidence**

Both the CE and the SS agreed that personal circumstances do challenge learners' participation and retention on the course, both felt the challenges experienced on the course also relate to learners lack of confidence and lack of self belief in their academic abilities.

SS: *Lack of confidence, lack of academic skills or lack of belief in their own academic skills*

CE: *They have it drilled into themselves, I'm no good I can't do it no point in me reading it and I was never good at maths so I'm not gonna be good at maths now, I'm wasting my time here*

CE: *You give them a task to do and they haven't even read it and I say, have you read it? and they say, I know nothing about that*

#### **4.6 What Learners Gained from Participating on the Course**

The main gains of participating in community education were the individual effect relating to increased confidence, both personally and interpersonally and improvement in academic abilities.



#### **4.6.1 Increased Confidence**

*FG: Being able to walk into the class and say how's things? alright?, what's the crack, how did ye get on last night? – that's something, isn't it?*

*FG: This course is like a stepping stone, gives ye all the ingredients...gives ye the confidence to be in a group again, which is great*

*FG: A lot of people would have self esteem and confidence problems and would be afraid to ask someone for help...now everybody is asking for help*

*SS: The outcomes are improved confidence...they have more confidence in the classroom setting, more belief in themselves*

#### **4.6.2 Belief in Academic Abilities**

For half of the learners this increase in confidence has led to increased belief in their academic abilities.

*FG: I've four assignments all linked in together at the moment and ye get one here every day but I'm coping with it so I think I know I will be able to do it in college*

*FG: I'm delighted now I came to it and after this course I will have the confidence to have me name down for a FETAC level 5, whereas I probably wouldn't go near FETAC Level 5 before*

### **4.7 Additional Supports Needed to Progress to Third Level Education**

Through sampling, all participants of the focus group were selected based on their desire to progress to third level education. However, the immediate response to the question “What supports do you need to help you progress to third level education?” yielded little response and indicates that learners were, at the time of the focus group, focused on the outcomes of the present course and not on plans to progress to third level.

*FG: Just passing this and getting it out of the way*

*FG: Won't apply for it just yet, see how I get on here*

Rephrasing the question to “What needs to happen to help you make the leap to third level?” yielded a greater response and indicated, in order for learners to consider progressing to third level education, they needed more time to build on what they have learned.

*FG: I think if ye could get into these first steps courses, that's what I call them do this for ten weeks, then a year and if I'm ready after a year I will know straight away*

*FG: The course is only ten weeks long and then everybody has to go, I think maybe if there was a course and something added on to it*

#### **4.7.1 Personal Development and Confidence Building**

The additional support identified by all learner participants needed to progress to third level education was personal development and confidence building. Learners indicated this need could be met by attending a further course which focuses on these areas.

*FG: It would be great if this was a stepping stone to another course, for instance, if they brought us in and gave us ten weeks of getting to know each other and building up each other's confidence and ye have all your bits and pieces*

*FG: Personal development would be great*

*FG: Personal development and confidence*

*CE: Assertiveness that's what a few people would need*

It is interesting to note that findings from the focus group and interview with the CE both suggest that running a course on personal development, prior to participating on the current course, would have perhaps meant the academic work would have been less challenging.

#### **4.7.2 Increase Academic Knowledge**

Learners expressed a desire to continue with their education. Learners considered building on their academic knowledge as an important need to be met prior to considering progress to third level education.

*FG: Ye after this course is done, if everybody does well like, if FAS has a course...anything to go on to something rather than stop*

FG: *I would like something that is linked in with this where this is just the first step, the second step is....even if it was history or geography and something else and then ye might say I will do me leaving cert (Agreement in the group)*

FG: *I would gladly come back (to the centre) I would love to do something like ECDL'*

FG: *A few more subjects would be great*

This finding was reinforced by the SS;

SS: *They don't feel ready in terms of skills and knowledge...some would like to try and do some other courses, either in the community or further education, just to build up their confidence and knowledge and then progress to third level*

Participation on the course was found to build confidence and develop academic study skills however confidence building and belief in academic abilities continue to be areas requiring significant additional support.

#### **4.7.3 Childcare and Part-time Flexible Learning Needs**

Both learners and the SS identified the provision of child care and part-time flexible third level options as additional supports needed to progress to third level education.

FG: *I'm not doing anything this September because I'm thinking of childcare...if I could get her (child) out of school and into childcare. I'm not gonna be able to do that because if you're in college nine to five...so maybe I will start off with a part time course ...that's what's holding me back...if that (childcare) was something they provided that would be really handy'*

Indeed, the SS finds this need to be relevant to other learners who had children;

SS: *I think there is a lack of flexible and part time progression options...a lot of people are not able to make a 3 or 4 year commitment... I think child care is a very real issue as well*

Given that learners identified family commitments and personal issues outside of the course as challenges that impact on their participation on the course, the lack of identification of

other needs and findings regarding their perceived readiness, suggests that these learners may not have considered progressing third level education as an option in the near future.

#### **4.7.4 Information Needs**

Both the CE and the SS identified, from their experience of learners needs, a range of information needs that need to be met in order for these learners to progress to third level education. These included; information on progression options, filling in college and grant application forms, identifying supports they are eligible to avail of and knowing how to access such.

*SS: Some people don't have the research skills to look up what they are interested in... so there is a lot of work to be done around information and guidance*

*SS: Understanding the whole grant system...more clarity around financial supports*

*SS: Form filling, it is a stumbling block for people they are really scary big forms and I don't mean that in a patronizing way, the grants forms as well are quite complicated*

### **4.8 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the findings of the research carried out. It identified what motivates learners to engage in a community education course. It highlighted a number of challenges that participants must overcome to participate in community education. Community education supports such as teaching style, the environment, learning in groups and financial supports have facilitated learners' participation and retention on this course. Participation on this community education course was found to have increased confidence levels however; the issue of confidence still remains an additional need to be met for learners to progress to third level education. Other additional needs are an increase in academic knowledge, childcare and part-time flexible options and information needs.

The next chapter will discuss in detail the findings from this research and relate the findings to relevant literature.

# **Chapter 5**

## Discussion

## 5. Chapter 5: Discussion

### 5.1 Discussion

This research set out to explore supports that facilitate participation and retention of learners on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education. This chapter will discuss the findings, laid out in the previous chapter and reflect on these findings in relation to relevant literature.

The participants in this study were found to be unemployed and/or single parents, early school leavers and aged, on average, 33 yrs. It is clear from the profile of participants involved in this research that this community education centre is targeting and attracting those recognised as priority target groups outlined by the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007-2016) and also in European Social Fund requirements. In addition, all learner participants were found to live in close proximity of the centre, which is located in a designated disadvantaged area as determined by the DES. This area experiences high rates of poverty and social exclusion. According to the Office of Social Inclusion:

*People live in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society* (<http://www.socialinclusion.ie/poverty.html>, para.1).

In this context, participants of this research are recognised as not having the same opportunity to achieve their full potential in education as others from more advantaged backgrounds. Inadequate income and resources are described as impediments in The Education Act, 1998's, definition of education disadvantage (Irish Statute Handbook, 2009, Section 32.9).

Robinson (1979) claims “purposeful learning occurs when individuals experience a problem or recognise a gap between where they are and where they want to be” (Robinson cited on [www.nuim.ie](http://www.nuim.ie), 2012). Motivation for participating on this course stems primarily from the

period of time out of the work force, which led to feelings and experiences of isolation and boredom. As a means of alleviating these feelings and creating a sense of purpose, learner participants expressed they were motivated to return to education to engage with people and groups and increase job related skills. In addition to these findings, one learner participant felt returning to education would have positive benefits for their children.

These findings indicate that the decision to return to education was an individual choice, one that was deliberate and followed a period of reflection. Findings regarding learners' motivation to participate in the course are similar to findings of recent research carried out by Power *et al.*, (2011). This research indicates the most dominant factor influencing learners' participation in community education is "something to get out of bed in the morning for" (Power *et al.*, 2011, p.32), which is similar to this research finding of creating "a sense of purpose" (SS). Similarly, engaging with other adults and groups and acquiring new knowledge were also found to be motivating factors in the Power *et al.*, (2011) research. To be a positive role model to their child/children did not appear to be a motivating factor for learners in the same study.

The issue of confidence and lack thereof, permeates throughout the findings of this research. The issue of lack of personal confidence, confidence in groups and belief in academic skill are found to present as challenges for learners on this course and as additional support needs. However, the combination of supports including teaching style, learning in groups, a welcome environment and financial support has supported learners' participation and retention on this course suggesting lack of confidence, as a challenge, was partially overcome by learners.

Learners indicate most supportive is the teaching style of the tutor and suggest it helped them learn and develop confidence in their academic abilities. Learners find the way information is broke down into manageable pieces and relating it to everyday occurrences such as paying bills, particularly useful. This style of module delivery was found by participants to ease the difficulty posed by the module content. The outcomes of this style has led to increased belief in learners academic abilities and is evident in responses such as, "I'm delighted now I came to it and after this course now, I will have the confidence to have me name down for a FETAC level 5, whereas, I probably wouldn't go near FETAC Level 5 before" (FG).

This style of teaching represents a liberal approach to learning, with the teacher imparting information as opposed to drawing it out of the learners (Bailey, 2010). The emphasis is on

being supportive and friendly and is conducive to individual outcomes. Connolly (2003b) describes this type of approach as a “top down” approach and claims

*Community education is radically different in this respect, educating the participants to become agents of their own learning, i.e. to develop a critical awareness of structures, systems, assumptions and knowledge (Connolly 2003b, p.7).*

The style of teaching evident in this research suggests the approach used is a community organisation model. This model of community education does not promote this level of critical awareness or tackle reasons for social exclusion as described by Connolly (2003b). This community organisation model is consistent with the dominant discourse of liberal education and is in contrast to the community education model for social change. According to Ryan *et al.*, (2001) a community organisation model locates the problem of disadvantage within these groups as opposed to challenging inequalities with the education system, suggesting it will only bring limited gain to those participating (Lynch, 1999).

Learning in groups builds confidence, supports the development of inter and intra personal relationships and increases academic learning. According to Mc Nair (2002) learning in a mutually supportive environment promotes learning potential for all participants and helps create and/or sustain social networks (Mc Nair cited in Power *et al*, 2011). Learners indicate that learning in groups, along with aiding academic learning also produced social and personal outcomes for them, particularly in terms of confidence. This outcome is also aligned with the motivating factor for participating on the course of meeting new people and groups.

A welcome environment was perceived by learners as a support that encouraged their participation and retention on this course. A welcome environment is defined by learner participants as the culture and policies of the centre and the physical location of the centre. Learners expressed feeling “cared for” and “you feel comfortable” (FG). The feeling of belonging is evident in responses such as “you don’t feel like a number” (FG) and has led to an increase in confidence in the learning environment. The environment is also found to be the most supportive factor followed by the experience of dignity and respect in both Bailey’s 2010 and 2011 research.

This finding is in contrast to the learners perception of the third level environment “I know for a fact I wouldn’t blend in there” (FG), supported by the SS opinion of learners view of



third level education as an “ivory tower” a place where they “don’t belong” (SS). This response illustrates the importance learners attach to the learning environment. The Lynch *et al.*, (1999) study found that one of the major social and cultural barriers pertaining to working class learners, was the sense that education, and in particular higher education was “remote and alien from the lives of their families” (p.109), similar to findings in this research. This finding suggests learners are experiencing both cultural barriers, in terms of their view of higher education and dispositional barriers, in terms of confidence. Recent research into community based adult education in Limerick, found of “major benefit” was when learners moved beyond their own communities for classes or having people from outside their local area join classes, as it exposes them to the fact that they have things in common with other people, from other locations, around the community (biographies) (Power et al., 2011, p.48).

Although participants describe an increase in confidence in terms of academic ability and meeting new people and groups as an outcome of participation, the issue of confidence still remains a significant additional need that requires support for learners to progress to third level education. This finding suggests that psychological needs in terms of confidence must be met in order for learners to progress to third level education. Applying Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to this finding, suggests that the lower levels of needs have been met in terms of physiology needs and safety needs for learners on this course, but amongst barriers to progression are psychological needs such as confidence and self esteem.

Lawrence (1999) defines confidence as “confidence is self esteem in practice and has two aspects; a) confidence in abilities b) confidence in personality” (p.92). Norman *et al.*, (2003) in their study of *The role of confidence in lifelong learning*, suggest “real and lasting solutions can only be achieved by tackling the dispositional barriers”. In this sphere, Norman *et al.*, (2003) suggest, “a factor often cited is the anxiety, low self esteem and general lack of confidence of many adults from traditional non participant backgrounds on returning to education” (Norman *et al.*, 2003, p.6). Although the Norman *et al.*, (2003) acknowledge there are still other barriers to be addressed they argue that more attention to dispositional barriers, particularly factors linked to learners’ confidence, is essential, if widening of participation to include those educationally disadvantaged is to be achieved.

The level of commitment and time required to complete the course outside of the classroom posed as a challenge for these learners in participating in the course. Situational constraints

(Cross, cited in O'Brien *et al.*, 2007) such as problems at home, caring responsibilities, time commitments and health issues are found to impact on participation, as these challenges hinder the amount of time participants have outside of the course to complete and organise homework.

Time constraints for non-traditional adult learners was also highlighted as a significant barrier to participation in the O'Brien *et al.*, (2007) research, with female respondents three times more likely to rate these external challenges as influences on participation (O'Brien, *et al.*, 2007). It may be reasonable to suggest that issues relating to personal issues/problems take precedence over course work requirements outside of the classroom, particularly for women in this research. In this context managing time and course requirements has successfully been overcome by facilitating learners through course hours, availability of staff, centre opening hours and being able to complete homework in the classroom.

Learners' participation and retention on this course is supported through a back to education allowance, which is equivalent to a social welfare payment rate. All learner participants agree that participation on this course would not be possible without such a payment. All course materials were provided along with access to computers and printers.

The Lynch *et al.*, (1999) study found that financial constraints were dominant in terms of accessing and participating in higher education. This research did not echo this finding for those on this course, as highlighted previously, it appears the learner participants do not feel ready to progress to third level education therefore, have not considered the financial implications of attending such. Research by Lynch *et al.*, (1999) indicates that students need to supplement their social welfare and maintenance grant with an income from working. This, for Lynch *et al.*, (1999) makes students of low income less educationally competitive as, if income is low; all income is prioritised into "making ends meet" (p.124). Thus, the additional financial cost of books, computers, printing or other services, enjoyed by the advantaged, may, out of necessity, rank as the lowest priority in a household. It may be fair to assume that the financial pressures Irish households are experiencing during this economic downturn may make it more difficult for some individuals to decide to return to education.

For one female learner participant childcare and other structural barriers including, part-time educational options, are perceived as additional supports needed to progress to third level education and according to the SS, serve as barriers for other learners, not involved in this study. This mirrors findings of research conducted by Maxwell *et al.*, (2009) who found

“lack of and/or affordability of childcare, insufficient part time learning opportunities and consequent lack of funding and compatibility with caring responsibilities ...are cited as the principal barriers for women accessing education” (Maxwell *et al.*, 2009, p. 10). Lynch *et al.*, (1999) posit, lack of financial security and the states’ failure to compensate for such, through inadequate maintenance grants, childcare supports and so on, has both indirect and direct effects on educational decisions.

Although learner participants showed enthusiasm for continuing their education they also had not made any plans to support this. Learner participants displayed little knowledge regarding options available to them. Informational barriers have been found to pose a significant barrier to accessing third level education or indeed additional education (Cross, 1981; King *et al.*, 2003, Lynch *et al.*, 1999). Lynch *et al.*, (1999) found information barriers to be particularly problematic for mature students. The SS attributed this to the “lack of research skills” of learners and added “there is a lot of work to be done around information and guidance.” The community educator and the student support officer look to moderate reforms such as research skills, information needs, financial support and a call for more part time flexible options as a means of widening participation. This response indicates the problem of disadvantage is located within the group as opposed to considering broader inequalities (Ryan *et al.*, 2001). This is an important finding as it suggests how acceptant participants of this research are of the inequalities that exist between those educationally advantaged and those who are disadvantaged.

## **5.1 Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the findings in relation to the relevant literature. The next chapter completes the research with conclusions and recommendations.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

## **6. Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **6.1 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The learner participants on this course are recognised as priority target groups as outlined by the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007-2016) indicating that this centre is targeting and attracting those who experience educational inequalities. Based on this conclusion the researcher recommends the following;

- To continue to attract groups who are under-represented in third level education and consider outreach work and advertising as methods to encourage hard to reach groups
- Promote supports available to potential learners
- Highlight the range of potential benefits of participating in this community education centre including, social, health, economic and educational benefits

The findings suggest that learners get involved in community education as a means of addressing experiences of isolation and boredom. This was found to be related to the length of time learners were out of the workforce. These feelings led learners to become motivated to meet new people, develop job related skills and knowledge and be able to support their children's learning. This indicates participation in community education was a conscious decision following a period of self reflection. The recommendations arising from this conclusion are:

- For the centre in this study to develop research into what motivates learners to get involved in community education
- For the centre in this study to promote community education as not just a course but a means of addressing a variety of needs

It is evident from these findings that the style of teaching, learning in groups, the provision of a welcome environment and financial support, has provided the learners with personal confidence and confidence in academic abilities in the context of this course. This support has facilitated participation and retention on a ten week, part-time, maths and English course. Based on this conclusion, recommendations in terms of support are as follows;

- To continue to provide and promote supports identified by learners in this research
- To conduct a review of the course in question and supports on offer with learner participants on completion of the course (as recommended by learners)
- To consider the provision of child care support for learners with children

The main challenge learner participants had to overcome to participate in this course were, the academic difficulty of the course, however participants were just finishing the course indicating this was a challenge they overcame. Other challenges related to the impact of personal issues on participation and having the time to complete homework outside of the course. As such the key recommendations in this respect are:

- For the centre to continue to facilitate the completion of homework and assignments in the centre
- Incorporate study skills such as organising time and materials and study methods into the course
- To continue to develop study skills in learners
- To continue to support students with the provision of printers, computers and required course materials

Learners' confidence has increased in terms of personal confidence, confidence in a group and confidence in academic achievements, therefore, providing social outcomes and increasing social capital. Recommendations based on this conclusion are:

- For the centre to promote the benefits of participating in community education including educational, social, health and wellbeing outcomes
- To evaluate the impact of participation in community education in terms of outcomes

Learners indicated that participation on the course has served as a “stepping stone” (FG) that provided them with the “ingredients” (FG) to progress to other courses and *not*, as yet, to progress third level education. This finding indicates there are additional needs that must be met prior to considering or progressing to third level education for these learners.

Additional needs found in this research are psychological needs in relation to confidence. Other additional needs found were to, increase academic knowledge, information needs and part time flexible options. Financial needs may also be an additional need when/if learners’ progress to third level education. There is also evidence in this research to suggest that learners experience dispositional, cultural and social barriers regarding third level education in particular learners’ perception that third level education is not a place where they feel they belong, indicating there is a need to raise awareness of these barriers to foster confidence and empowerment. In terms of additional supports needed for community education learners to progress to third level education, the following are recommendations.

- Run personal development workshops prior to attending this course or incorporate such into this course
- Develop individual personal plans with individuals to include follow on education options
- For the centre to provide mechanisms to ‘bridge’ social capital through the provision of information with links to further education options and third level education
- To create opportunities for learners to engage with learners from similar backgrounds who( successfully) progressed to third level, for example, a ‘buddy system’
- To raise awareness of the supports available at third level education
- For the centre to incorporate critical reflection into learning modules and raise consciousness regarding barriers that persist and supports to overcome such

This study set out to explore supports that facilitate participation and retention of learners on a community education course and additional supports needed to progress to third level education. Using a qualitative approach the researcher has discovered a range of supports that facilitate learners’ successful engagement and includes; the style of teaching, a welcoming environment and learning in groups. There are a number of additional support

needs that need to be met if and when participants decide to progress to third level education amongst them are, personal development and confidence building, increase academic knowledge part-time flexible options and the need for information.

This study was small scale hence, is only representative of a small number of people involved in community education, however findings highlighted may have potential to benefit others involved in the provision of community education.



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# Appendices

## **Appendix 1: Letter of Introduction to Community Educator Seeking Participants**

MA Child, Family & Community,

DIT, Mountjoy Square,

Ph: xxx xxx xxxx,

Email: xxxxxxxx

08/05/12

Dear Educator,

I am a student studying on the above course. As part of my thesis, I propose an exploration of supports that facilitate learners' participation and retention on a community education course and additional supports, if any, that may encourage progression to third level education.

As you are aware the need for research on Community Education is crucial in order to track the wider benefits it contributes to individuals, local communities and society. The outcomes of this research will feed into AONTAS and the Community Education Network. In the long term, the study has potential to encourage more community education learners to progress to third level education.

For this purpose I am seeking your support in identifying participants for a focus group of learners (10-12) and an educator of that group for an interview. Both should take approximately 45-60 minutes.

I am very flexible and am willing to meet with you and/or the learners group at a time and venue suited to you and/or the group. Ideally I would like to meet with community learners in their community education setting.

A copy of findings will be available on request or at the AONTAS office. I will be available for feedback if required.

This research is in partnership with Irish National Association of Adult Education (AONTAS) and supported by Community Links.

THANK YOU FOR TIME

Lorraine Perkins

## **Appendix 2: Interview Guide for Focus Group**

- 1) Are you enjoying the course?-
- 2) What type of course is it? What does it involve
- 3) Why did you get involved in the course?
- 4) What, if any, are the challenges in participating in this course?
- 5) How are you supported on the course?
- 6) Would you like to progress to third level education?
- 7) What supports would you need to progress to third level?
- 8) Are there any additional supports you feel you need to progress to TL?
- 9) What will hinder your progression to TL?



## **Appendix 3: Closed Questions for Learners**

### *Profile Information of learner participants*

**Please tick the box relevant to you**

Are you: ☐ Male ☐ Female

**What is your highest educational attainment?**

☐ Primary ☐ Inter, Group, Junior Cert ☐ Leaving Cert

**Are you aged:**

☐ 18- 23years ☐ 24-65years ☐ Over 65

If you are aged please state 18- 23years you Fathers occupation

**Are you any of the following?**

☐ Not of Irish origin ☐ Living in rural Ireland ☐ Have a registered disability  
☐ Parenting alone ☐ Unemployed ☐ Ex – offender

## Appendix 4: Focus Group Extracts with Themes and Sub-themes

### CODE FG

Code	Quote	Theme	Subtheme
Q.	Is there anything else you felt you had to overcome be here on this course	Challenges	
9.45.d	Ye I had a lack of confidence around other people	Challenges	Confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With people</li> </ul>
9.46.c	Same as me self ye	Challenges	
9.47.d	Even when we got up and did that play thing that wouldn't have been me but because we got to know each other the confidence just kicked in so you just had a laugh and got in and done it	Outcomes	Confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With people</li> </ul>
9.48.a	I don't think anyone would have a problem now going into a group or a big class now cause we got up and did a little play as (indicates to B) was saying a lot of people would have self esteem and confidence problems and would be afraid to ask someone for help so they just .... and now everybody asking for help	Support	Support in the group
		Challenge	Confidence
9.49.c	For me if I don't have confidence I won't get into anything, I just wouldn't have the confidence to try anything	Additional needs	Confidence
9.50.a	For me it's completely different it's a fear like a fear of maybe feeling stupid		Confidence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic ability</li> </ul>
B	Or failing a test or something		
C	I would find it hard now		
9.51.a	I would be the opposite now....I can stand in a room and talk to whatever amount of people it wouldn't bother me, but I wanted to challenge me brain to see could I do all this I'm really buzzing it like I'm loving it	Motivation	Broaden knowledge
Q	Would anybody in the group like to progress or see themselves going to college or FETAC level 6		
9.52.b	Ye		
9.53.c	Just don't have the confidence	Additional needs	Confidence
10.54c	I have my options open but if a job came up I would let this go by the wayside, that's been honest, if I got a job, like, I need money as well, I need to pay a mortgage. I said while there is nothing doing I will give it a bash I		Financial supports

	will broaden my horizons maybe. I will take something out of it, I would like, but I'm finding it hard at the moment but I will give it a bash	Challenges	
Q	What supports do you need to progress to third level? Is there anything the course or the colleges could do for you?		
10.55.d	Just passing this, get it out of the way		Readiness?
Q	What do you think needs to happen for you to be able to make the leap to third level education?		
10.56.d	Ye they could if you're struggling they get give ye a tutor to help with homework because I know I would stay back if I was struggling	Additional needs	Homework
10.57.b	Ye you can organise any time to support worker just to come down	Supports on the course	
10.58.b	Well my child is gonna be in big school from 9 t one, that's why I'm not going to college, like I actually said I'm not going to do it this September because I'm thinking of the childcare whereas if I could get her out of school and into childcare I'm not gonna be able to do that because if you're in college 9 to 5 so I would have to rely on family to do it so maybe I will start off with a part time course and then gradually or if I do get the help from her Da I don't know I will have to see at the time that's what's holding me back anyways	Additional needs	Childcare
10.56.c			Flexible options
Q	Is there any additional supports you need to progress?		
Q	Could you see yourself applying for college tomorrow? What could make that happen?		
11.57.b	The help from in here like I know we are getting a lot of it, that's why I won't apply for it just yet to see how I get on with this course and I know we are getting a lot of support through it – like we come here whenever we feel like it	Supports on the course	Welcome environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• safe</li> </ul>
Q	Run a course here is that what you mean?	Additional supports	
11.58.a	Possibly because you are in your own community and you feel comfortable ye know – I didn't even know they link ye to other courses	Supports on the course	Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physical location</li> </ul>

## **Appendix 5: Interview Guide for CE and SS Interviews**

- 1) Tell me about the course you offer to learners in this research?
- 2) How would you describe your student cohort?
- 3) Why do you think learners want to get involved in the course?
- 4) How are learners supported on the course?
- 5) What are the outcomes for learners on this course?
- 6) What are the supports necessary to realise the learners' goal of progressing to third level education?
- 7) Are there any additional supports that you feel are required for the learners to progress to TL?
- 8) What are the challenges students encounter in participating on the course?

## Appendix 6: Consent form for participants

### *Consent Form for Focus Group Participants*

I have been informed of and have accepted the following;

- Statement and purpose of research
- The results will be available when the study is complete in line with DIT guidelines
- That your name will not be used in any part of this research piece
- That direct quotes will be used in the completed research
- That the interviewer may take notes for observation purposes
- That I have given permission for this interview to be recorded and that the audio recording will be kept in a locked PC file, and will be disposed of as per DIT guidelines
- The information shared within this group will remain confidential and will not be shared/discussed/repeated outside of this group

Additional comments/agreements

---

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**\*An exact copy of this consent form was used for the remaining participants but excluded the point regarding group confidentiality**